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FARMING FOR WILDLIFE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Conservation cereal



Peter Thompson (GCT)

The broadleaved weeds in conservation cereals attract a wide range of insects.

Conservation cereal can be created as margins or whole fields. Spraying is restricted to allow small amounts of broadleaved weeds and their associated insects to develop. Fields for conservation cereal should be chosen carefully to avoid encouraging a flush of highly competitive weeds. Management involves avoiding the use of all but a few herbicides in the crop, and avoiding the use of insecticides after 15 March.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Allows some broadleaved weeds to grow in the cereal crop

Conservation cereal in appropriate places will contain small amounts of broadleaved weeds, which have very little competitive impact on the crop. This management is ideal for sites with declining arable plant populations, but is also appropriate in areas with light soils that are unlikely to be infested with highly competitive weeds such as cleavers.

Boosts insect numbers in the crop

broadleaved weeds support a rich diversity of insects that do no harm to the crop. Some of these insects are natural predators of crop pests such as aphids. Creating a rough grass margin next to the conservation cereal will provide an ideal over-wintering habitat for many of these beneficial insects. They move into the crop in the spring and, as a result, need protection from insecticides after 15 March.

Provides ideal feeding habitat for chicks and adults

Many farmland birds feed their chicks on insects. Yellowhammers will search for insects in the crop to feed their chicks and the adults will also feed on insects and unripe grain. An abundance of insects in the crop margin is essential. Leaving the stubble after a conservation cereal will benefit seed-eating farmland birds over the winter as the stubble holds weed seeds as well as spilt grain.

GUIDELINES OVERLEAF

HOW CAN I SITE AND MANAGE CONSERVATION CEREAL?

CMS/ESA Where to site it

- The ideal location for conservation cereal is alongside rough grass margins. Rough grass margins will provide cover for over-wintering insects. The insects will then move into the crop in spring and be protected as insecticides are not permitted after 15 March.
- Conservation cereal management is most suited to light soils in locations that do not suffer from high burdens of competitive grass weeds or cleavers.
- If you find that the conservation cereal becomes too weedy, select a more appropriate location in following years.

CMS/ESA Management

- Conservation cereal can be created as a margin, 6–12 m wide, or as a whole field.
- No herbicides should be used in the growing crop, unless control of cleavers or wild oats is necessary. Cleavers may be controlled using a herbicide containing amidosulfuron as the sole active ingredient. All wild oat herbicides, apart from those (such as isoproturon) that also control broadleaved weeds, may be used for wild oat control.
- If other broadleaved weeds create a significant problem then you should contact your CMB adviser.

- Insecticides should not be used after 15 March.
- When spraying close to conservation cereal take precautions to prevent spray drift.
- Do not use pre-harvest desiccant, for example glyphosate, if the stubble is being kept. This ensures that weed seeds are available in the stubble over winter, providing an important late winter seed source for birds when the spilt grain has been used up.

Conservation cereal with no fertiliser or manure

- Less competitive broadleaved weeds benefit from the exclusion of fertilisers and manure and this can also reduce the burden of invasive weeds such as cleavers. The more open crop structure also benefits some bird species.

Examples of acceptable sprays for conservation cereal

All fungicides

All plant growth regulators

Cleaver control: herbicides with

amidosulfuron as sole active ingredient

Grass weed control: wild oat herbicides,

excluding those that also control

broadleaved weeds

Note: Spray application records must be kept if using the above herbicides

KEY POINTS

- Conservation cereal is most suited to areas with low infestations of wild oats and cleavers, particularly on light soils.
- Conservation cereal can boost predatory insect numbers and this helps with pest control.
- Where possible, retain stubble after the conservation cereal to provide spilt grain and weed seeds over the winter for farmland birds.

See also the RSPB/DARD advisory sheets on:

- Yellowhammer
- Rough grass margins
- Wild bird cover

CMS/ESA = payments are available under the Countryside Management and Environmentally Sensitive Areas Schemes

You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:



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